

Foundation of All Good Qualities

Ninth teaching

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The Rarity of a Precious Human Life

Let me resume from where we left off. We have been talking about our precious life, how difficult it is to find in terms of its cause and in terms of its very nature. In terms of its cause it is said that the causes are rare to be fulfilled by people, thus this human life is difficult to come by.

Besides being difficult to find, the very human life that we have found – but employed to engage or do negative things – itself has become an impediment to finding another human life. To this effect, a vinaya text says,

Of beings in the three lower realms, animals are fewer in number as compared to beings in other two lower realms. Between animals and humans, human number is smaller.

This is a strong message. Given that the human population is much smaller as compared to the population of animals, which itself is far smaller in number as compared to those of the two other lower realms, we need to wake up to realise how terribly valuable this life is and then try to use it maximally to perform virtues before we lose it.

Among humans when you compare those who have not met with the teaching of Buddha and those who have, the number of those who have is much smaller. When you take into account these numerical comparisons, you cannot help but realise how it is nearly impossible to be able to find the supportive spiritual vehicle of this life, which has met and come into contact with the Dharma. Considering all these facts, it is plain that by its very nature a precious human life, in comparison to all other life forms lower realms even among humans, is really hard to find.

Now, in terms of an analogy human life is equally hard to come by and this analogy is found in Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*. He gives the analogy of a golden yoke, which is adrift on a vast ocean and carried from one side to the other by the waves. At the bottom of the ocean there is a blind tortoise, which pops up to the surface of the ocean once every 100 years. What is the likelihood of the tortoise, when popping up after every 100 years, being able to thrust its head through the hole of the golden yoke? You cannot say it is impossible, but it is really hard.

Even much harder than the tortoise thrusting its neck in the golden yoke is the chance of human life. In this analogy, Buddha's teaching is like the golden yoke, the blind tortoise is like us. The 100 years at the bottom signifies that most of the time most beings are born in the lower realms. Once in a blue moon they are reborn as a human, but it's not certain they will meet with the golden yoke of the teaching of the Buddha.

But somehow, whatever happened, we managed to find this rare life. The long and the short of all this is to make haste while we have it, or else we will lose it. When we lose it, we have no guarantee we will bounce back with ease. It is more likely to go back to where we came from, when it does happen like if one is reborn an animal then again the pattern of sinking deeper into the lower realms will repeat. Before that happens, seize the opportunity.

As we have been told time and again, all samsaric beings have been influenced, swayed by the profound ignorance of believing that everything exists truly. Swayed by that, we have misunderstood our situation. As a result, we find ourselves easily influenced by course disturbing emotions or thoughts like attachment and anger. Having done it so many times, it has almost become our second nature and when it comes to thinking negative thoughts, doing negative things, it doesn't take any effort. Conversely, when it comes to doing liberating activities like practice even for a short time, it seems to be an uphill battle.

All Lamrim texts when dealing with this topic unanimously advise us that human life is extremely difficult to come by when you consider the topic of human life from different angles. While we have it, we should make every effort to familiarise ourselves with virtues, the only door to happiness. If we gradually familiarise there is a chance virtues will replace our negative tendencies and virtues will gradually take on being our second nature. When that happens, performance of virtues will go swimmingly. There is every chance then to make it to the state of nirvana and liberation.

It says this is a time when everything conducive to practice has come together as we have the opportunity from outside and inside to practice Dharma:

- Externally we have met with spiritual mentors who are like Buddhas themselves.
- Internally speaking our sense are intact, they are able to perform the functions they are supposed to perform.

Therefore we are blessed by all these conditions with some degree of intellect and wisdom to apply ourselves to doing hearing, contemplating and meditation. Therefore if we apply ourselves this time...

Rejoicing in Our Rare Opportunity

As an aside, I want to emphasise conducive factors for practice are rare to come by. When there is a lama, maybe there are no listeners. Or when there is a lama, the lama cannot communicate with the language of the audience. For example in my case, I can't speak your language, I'm utterly dependent on translation. So not everything that is necessary for practice is easy to come by.

Going back to the commentary, if only one applies oneself to practice, this wonderful dynamic human life is able to achieve human life and life of god and goddesses, which are temporary goals. Ultimately it is also able to achieve the state of Vajradhara or the state of enlightenment. In light of this, we need to see for ourselves how this very life is highly purposeful and meaningful.

For example it says, if somebody is filled with joy or is somebody is filled with distress, then even when they wake up from time to time at night, the same of either feelings will naturally crop up. Either they are happy or still feel distress. In the same way, as an outcome of having considered the various factors concerning human life, we need to have the same feeling of joy again and again thinking about having obtained this one-time precious life we have obtained. And how, generally speaking, samsara is endless and yet when one works to achieve the state of Buddhahood you have to work to achieve Buddhahood for aeons. Then day and night one needs to be filled with joy and resolve to make the most of this one-time chance given and to this end you pray, you entreat your guru that you develop this kind of ongoing appreciation and ongoing need to make the most of this life.

It's saying as said before, we have all felt it ourselves at times when something has gone well during the day and we're filled with joy and when we wake up the same joy resurfaces to the mind. On the other hand, when something has gone terribly badly and that causes some problem, there is psychological distress and the same thing will happen: when we wake up we are bothered by the same issues. In other words, human emotions of joy and distress linger for quite some time. Just as they do

so, we also need to allow our realisation of the rarity, value and purpose of human life and appreciate it again and again.

Let's consider two people: somebody who believes in Dharma and someone who doesn't. The one who accepts Dharma also believes in lifetimes, past and future. The other person doesn't believe in lifetimes. There is a big difference in the sense of optimism and hope that the two people have or don't have. The person who believes in Dharma also believes in lifetimes and the quality of life in the future is determined by the quality of actions that they perform. Knowing that, they apply themselves judiciously to virtues and abstain from nonvirtues. When they have problems in the meantime, they are able to cope with situations knowing how the pattern of life in samsara is fraught with suffering, but the sufferings are impermanent and will not go on forever. When they are about to die for example, knowing that there is a future life and one has done one's best in virtue whilst one was alive, one is filled with optimism and it's like shedding an old cloak and according a new one.

The other person who doesn't believe in Dharma and lifetimes, there is no awareness that their actions have far-reaching ramifications. In the meantime when problems are faced, the person does not have easy access to some copy strategies. As a result of inability to cope, the magnitude of the problem increases. Then, when the time of death comes there is added distress, knowing that what was thought to be permanent life has come to an end and therefore there is a lot of problems.

The person who believes in Dharma, they are guided by this pervading awareness that if they perform a negative action, for example if they harm somebody, not only will they immediately hurt the person but ultimately the action will hurt themselves. They will not easily or casually or knowingly hurt an insect. They are filled with a sense of respect for all life forms knowing that just as they themselves wish to be happy, so do all life forms. One's positive actions in relation to them will impact on one. There is an ongoing dialogue that really guides them, helps them to refrain from harmful actions. The other person who doesn't believe, they don't have such information because they have blocked the in-flow of such information by the very belief that there is no past or future life and that their actions may not impact on the quality of their experience.

The person who has a belief in Dharma, they may not be great scholars or the best of practitioners, but they still have something in them that says, *"I oughtn't do this."* There is some restraining chit-chat that happens in the mind before they do something. This very chit-chat, internal dialogue which is a great help, becomes the wall that prevents them from doing wrong actions. The person who doesn't believe in Dharma doesn't have this strategy, they are not able to think whether they ought to or oughtn't to, considering the consequences. They just do it. Just because they don't believe in past or future lifetimes, doesn't mean that in reality their actions are free of any consequences.

Let me give an anecdote. I was in Europe in 2009 at a rail way station. Something came up to my mind which had never occurred to me both in Tibet or India. It was 2009, early in the morning a railway station. The train stopped and as soon as the train stopped it is as if a worm was opened. People fully wired listening to their music rushed out like ants changing colonies, they were so frantically busy and I thought to myself, *"Gosh if I were to fall down and have a heart attack, I'm not going to be saved by these busy people."*

I understand now they have to chase time, they were racing against time and therefore they were not able to pay attention to their surroundings, the people around them. In places like Tibet and India, whilst people have to go about their business, people always run into each other and life is at a much slower pace. As a result, people are able to observe what is going on around them. I also saw on the train a lot of people were having a nice snooze. I suppose that is the only time they get to have sleep

because they are far too busy with work. As a result of being caught up in this frantic pursuit of success in limited time, obviously they are never going to have time for practice or talking about spiritual concerns or Dharma.

Life caught in the pursuit of material success completely robs people of time for Dharma. For example, many Tibetans now go to Europe and America. They succeed in getting to these places. Before going to America, they were able to have dinner together and have a chat, or at breakfast time. But once in America, I often heard of stories of a couple not being able to see each other. When the husband goes to work and comes home, it's the wife's turn to go to work. They are caught in a shift system and they are not able to have even time to have a family talk.

All in all, please take to heart pieces of advice found on these pages which all boil down to the essential point of making the most of this life in doing Dharma practice. Unlike in the past, you have now relatively easy access to Dharma material in that a lot of Dharma material is available on the internet. You can download teachings by His Holiness and many other great lamas. Put them on your system and listen to them when you work, or when you travel long distance. Make the most of technology to help. Similarly there are many materials or teachings of his holiness in book forms and it would be really useful to have time to read these books.

Q&A

Now what do people want, questions or some meditation?

Audience: More teachings!

Geshe-la: I do appreciate the need for more teaching, but I also realise that I have to give time to people to ask questions and make it interactive. If I keep talking, it's like, *"This is what I know if you get it or not."* But I need to gauge your understanding from the questions you ask.

Audience: The police ran a checkpoint to work out who was going to the assisted suicide rallies. To aid someone to die in New Zealand is illegal. The movement is getting strong and stronger that it's a good cause to be able to help someone who is terminally ill commit suicide. From a Buddhist point of view, if someone is really suffering and that process is interfered with, even if someone thinks they're helping but because you didn't complete the suffering you have to do it again. But you can't tell people that sort of thinking if they don't believe in reincarnation. What does Geshe-la have to say about this topic? What is a useful dialogue with people who think this is a great idea?

Geshe-la: I believe that the police who have stopped the participants at the meeting, they stopped it out of good intention to save life regardless of quality of life at the end. People who wanted to go to the meeting and people who are pro-exit, they also want to help the patient regardless of what their needs are. Both people are doing it out of good motivation.

In all situations from Buddhist practice point of view, whenever there is a tricky situation as this, you have to consider two things. One is called prohibition, the other is purpose. Gag-cha is not allowed to do, prohibition. Purpose is something that needs to be achieved. In different situations the force of the two, prohibition and purpose would be different.

For example, I'm a Buddhist monk and I vowed I will not tell lies to anyone or kill. But if I see a man chasing another man and the runner was able to run faster than the chaser, and the chaser asks me if I have seen the man run that way... If I say, *"Yes he has gone this way,"* then I would have guided the murderer to kill the person. In that situation should I have told a lie because I'm not allowed to lie? What is more important, saving life or saving my vow? Or, when the man says have you seen this man

and I say no I've never seen a man run, not one person went this way. Now I have lied. From your point of view which is better, to break the vow of not telling lies or the purpose of saving life?

The issue here is saving life. Obviously, it's common sense that it's better for the monk under vows not to lie to break the vow and save a life. Generally telling lies is bad, and especially if you are under vows like me, a Buddhist monk. Now I have also vowed to protect life. So in this case, is my adherence to the prohibition of lying more important, or is breaking the vow and saving life more important?

In the case of this monk, he's better to break the vow of not lying in order to achieve a greater purpose of saving life.

Audience: What is the consequence of breaking the vow not to lie, even with the purpose of saving life?

Geshe-la: In this case, I would say I would get a lot of merit by breaking the vow of not lying because when you weigh the two issues saving life and breaking a vow of not lying, obviously saving life is much more important than simply saving my face. There are two things: prohibition and purpose, something to be done or achieved. So you need to weight the costs and benefits of the two.